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ABSTRACT

This policy brief reviews relationships between state special education funding formulas and placements in which children with disabilities are served, specifically compliance with mandates for a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Data analyzed were for the school year 1992-93. Interviews were conducted with state level personnel in three states with relatively high and increasing rates of regular class placement. Findings indicated: (1) high rates of disagreement about the best relationship between funding formulas and the provision of services; (2) no support for the assertion that funding formulas based on where students receive services encourage placement of students into high reimbursement options; and (3) an association between density of population and high use of separate placements and between high use of various types of separate placements. The report concludes that there is limited evidence that any particular funding formula is used more often by states with relatively higher rates of placements in regular classes and that, in all likelihood, there are no incentive-free financing systems. Graphs and tables provide detailed findings on rates of regular class placement by state, types of funding formulas, and state characteristics. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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State Special Education Funding Formulas

A Project ALIGN Issue Brief April 1997

Issues in Implementing Both FAPE and LRE

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State Special Education Funding Formulas

A Project ALIGN *Issue Brief* April 1997

Issues in Implementing Both FAPE and LRE

Interest and Controversy

Meeting the goals of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476, IDEA) relies on full implementation of the mandate to provide a free appropriate public education for ALL children with disabilities (FAPE) *and* the full implementation of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirement of IDEA. Twenty years of education practice and case law are testament to the difficulty and importance of meeting both of these mandates successfully. Early efforts were often focused on FAPE, i.e., identifying and serving children with disabilities who were previously unserved. In recent years, educators have increased efforts to provide services to more children within integrated environments.

Fiscal support for special education provides the basis for implementation of the law and can, explicitly or implicitly, influence the extent to which both the FAPE and LRE mandates are fully implemented. Among other factors, the shortfall between promised and actual federal financial support, the relative state and local share of special education expenditures, and the particular funding formula used by a state to support special education may function as fiscal incentives or disincentives to full identification and provision of services within least restrictive environments.

Currently, many states provide more money for students that are served in more restrictive placements, such as separate, private schools for students with disabilities.

Recently, attention has been given to whether funding formulas should or do influence placement decisions, and whether or not a formula should be "placement-neutral," or an incentive to serve children with disabilities through inclusive arrangements. Placement-neutral funding is defined as the distribution of special education money to local school divisions entirely on the basis of school enrollment, school-age population, or the number of special education students identified in the district, without regard to the setting in which those students are served. Currently, many states provide more money for students that are served in more restrictive placements, such as separate, private schools for students with disabilities.

A recent proposal of the IDEA Working Group is to amend IDEA to mandate that states implement placement-neutral special education funding formulas.

At the time of this writing, a bi-partisan IDEA Working Group was developing proposals for use in the reauthorization of the IDEA. A recent proposal of the IDEA Working Group was to amend IDEA to mandate that states implement placement-neutral special education funding formulas. Federal law would dictate how states disburse both Federal and State money in special education within their state (IDEA Working Group, CEC, April 1997). Recent discussions of the merit of this proposal have examined the experiences of states which have a high percentage of children with disabilities served in regular classes. These discussions have highlighted both the promise and pitfalls of "placement neutral funding" (Special Education Report, March 5, 1997).

A recent interview with State Directors of Special Education in Special Education Finance Reform, indicated that many states are seeking formula changes to remove fiscal incentives favoring more restrictive placements (Parrish,

EC 305345

1995a). Many state directors reported that they are reconsidering 1) and differentials related to placement that may have had a cost rationale but may now be problematic in creating a fiscal incentive for separate placements, and 2) the use of a separate funding mechanism for separate public and private special education schools, particularly private placements, or centralized public schools (e.g., a state school for individuals with a particular disability). Some states are concerned that separate funding streams supporting transportation are no longer available when children are re-integrated to support implementation of specially designed equipment or instructional needs in the inclusive environment. In recent years, at least five states have moved to implement census based-formulas, in which special education fiscal support is based on the school age resident population, rather than the actual count of children identified as disabled (Danielson, O'Reilly, and Parrish, in press).

Special and general educators, policymakers, and advocates are very divided about "what are" or "what should be" the relationships among funding formulas, the provision of services within least restrictive environments, and the provision of needed services to all students with disabilities. Some believe that funding formulas that provide more monies for placements in more segregated settings interfere with full implementation of the LRE mandate. Others contend that funding formulas that are placement neutral threaten the FAPE mandate; i.e., they are a disincentive to the identification of all children who have a disability or encourage provision of all of the services or supports needed by an individual child.

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Some believe a funding formula that encourages placement in general education settings is inconsistent with that provision of the LRE mandate requiring a full continuum of placement settings. Others believe full implementation of IDEA is premised on the principle that funding should never influence identification, service, or placement decisions, and that full implementation of IDEA depends on continuing professional development and monitoring strategies, and reforms in education policy and finance.

Many have argued that insufficient information exists to support the contention that changing funding formulas will affect decisions regarding where special education services are to be delivered. Would monies saved from placements in private, segregated settings be used to provide services or reduce staff/student ratios within inclusive arrangements? Would a formula unrelated to settings make it easier to "count" and receive financial support for children with disabilities served full-time in regular classes? Will funding formulas based on student enrollment support availability of a full continuum of settings? Many such questions about the impact of "placement neutral" funding formulas remain unanswered.

Funding Formulas and Restrictive Placements

O'Reilly (1995) investigated relationships between state funding formulas and rates of placement in *separate classes*, schools and residential facilities. In addition to analyses of state reported placement data and state funding formulas, interviews were conducted with 10 states, seven of whom were high users and three low users of separate placements. O'Reilly found no uniform support for the assertion that special education finance formulas that fund school districts on the basis of where students receive services encourage the placement of students into high reimbursement options. In fact, the formulas used in most of the low use states are based on a percentage reimbursement formula, a type of formula that is generally considered placement neutral, that is, the proportion of funds received from the state is the same no matter where a student receives services, and regardless of the cost of those services. Thus, while low use states tend to use a funding formula that can be placement neutral, there is no common pattern among high use states and thus no suggestion that

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the type of funding formula alone is sufficient to encourage placement in more restrictive settings (O'Reilly, 1995).

O'Reilly did, however, find a distinct regional pattern in the use of various special education funding models, and geographic trends were observed in the use of separate placements. North Central and northwestern states were the lowest users of separate placements, whereas central farming states more often placed students in separate placements, and the mid-Atlantic states were among the highest users of separate placements. Northwest, north central and central plains states were the lowest users of separate public day schools and separate classes.

O'Reilly observed that the density of population in a state was associated with high use of separate placements, and high use of one type of separate placement is associated with high use of other types of separate placements. Interviews with state special education administrators confirmed that in states making little use of separate placements, "rurality" was a factor--it was often impractical or inefficient to create separate classes or schools for students with disabilities.

O'Reilly and colleagues at the Center for Special Education Finance concluded many factors influence implementation of the LRE mandate, not funding formula alone. Among other factors they cited were: general education funding mechanisms, the relative state and local share of special education costs, and other state initiatives related to particular placements. They concluded:

> Funding systems that are relics of an earlier era, when underidentification was a major concern, and when segregated placements for students with disabilities often went unquestioned, need to be redesigned to reflect current program and policy goals. Funding formulas can be modified or designed to increase the flexibility needed by districts to serve students in the most appropriate settings and to remove fiscal disincentives to least restrictive placements (O'Reilly, 1995, p.22).

Purpose of this Issue Brief

A recent charge to the Congressional IDEA Working Group was to propose only those changes to IDEA that could be supported by validating research and practice information. Similarly, the IDEA Working Group has stated its intent to distinguish between problems of implementation and problems with the law, and to respond accordingly. To support more informed decision making, this *Issue Brief* looks at information related to relationships between state special education funding formulas and the placements in which children with disabilities are served, including:

- State by state variation in rates of placement in regular classes
- States grouped by special education funding formulas and ranked by percentage served in regular classes
- Relationships between state level regular class placement rates and population density
- Experiences of three states regarding funding formulas and placements in integrated settings.

> ***. . . density of population is associated with high use of separate placements, and high use of one type of separate placement is associated with high use of other types of separate placements.***

Investigating Regular Class Placement Rates

The federal description of special educational placement in the regular class setting is: students who receive the majority of their education program in a regular classroom and receive special education and related services outside the regular classroom for less than 21 percent of the school day. It includes children placed in a regular class and receiving special education within the regular class, as well as children placed in a regular class and receiving special education outside the regular class" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Our analysis of placement rates drew from data submitted to the US Department of Education by the states for school year 1992-93. For each state, we calculated the portion of the resident, school-age population that were identified as students with disabilities and served in the regular class setting. This formula for calculating placement rates differs from the usual method, i.e., calculating what percent of *identified* students are served in a particular setting. The rationale for the resident population formula is that it removes the effect of varying identification rates across states. For example, if two states each serve 30 percent of their identified students in regular class settings, but State A identifies 7 percent of the resident population for special education services and State B identifies 11 percent of the resident population, the placement rates cannot be compared with integrity. An accurate description of the placement rates used for the analyses below is "the percent of the

Table 1
State Funding Formulas

Funding Formula	Definition
Pupil Weights	Two or more categories of student-based funding for special programs, expressed as a multiple of regular education aid
Resource-Based	Funding based on allocation of specific education resources (e.g., teachers or classroom units). Classroom units are derived from prescribed staff/student ratios by disabling condition or type of placement
Percent Reimbursement	Funding based on a percentage of allowable or actual expenditures
Flat Grant	A fixed funding amount per student or per unit

Source: Parrish, 1995

resident population that is identified as a special education student and is served in a given setting."

Because of the formula used for the calculation of placement rates, states' placement figures and relative ranking in the analyses presented below differ from those published elsewhere (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 1995). We believe, however, that the present method provides an improved means of characterizing national placement patterns and of comparing states' placement practices. This approach to characterizing placement rates has been used by several other researchers recently (O'Reilly, 1995).

Utilizing data provided in Parrish's (1995b) brief, states were grouped by type of funding formula and basis of allocation. The four major funding formulas used by states are shown in Table 1. Each of these formula types can be subdivided, however, according to the basis of allocation (Parrish, 1995b), yielding twelve different formula/allocation combinations currently in use (see Table 2).

Funding Formulas and Regular Classes Placement Rates

Calculated in the manner described above, regular class placement rates vary considerably across states. The percent of the resident population that are identified as students with disabilities and are placed in regular class settings ranges from .4 percent (Arizona) to 6.7 percent (Massachusetts). As shown in Figure 1, Regular Class placement rates for most states fall between 2 percent and 5 percent.

For each funding formula group of states, the average regular class placement rate was then calculated. Table 2 presents a comparison of regular classroom placement rates by type of state special education funding formula. The differences among mean regular class placement rate values for states grouped according to funding formulas are not statistically significant, in part no doubt, due to the fact that the number of states in each group is quite small. Nonetheless, the groups do demonstrate substantial variation in regular class placement rate, the rate for "Flat / District Enrollment" states is more than twice that of "Resource-Based / Allowable Cost" states.

As Table 2 indicates, the overall difference in regular class placement rates between the highest and the lowest groups is 2.7%. A "flat" formula based on district enrollment was used in the four states with the highest regular class placement rates and states using "Percent reimbursement" formulas also placed a relatively high percentage in regular classes. "Weighted," and "resource-based" formulas were in place in states with the lowest rates of placement in regular classes and a "flat" formula based on special education enrollment was also associated with relatively low rates of regular class placement.

Figure 1
Regular Class Placement Rates

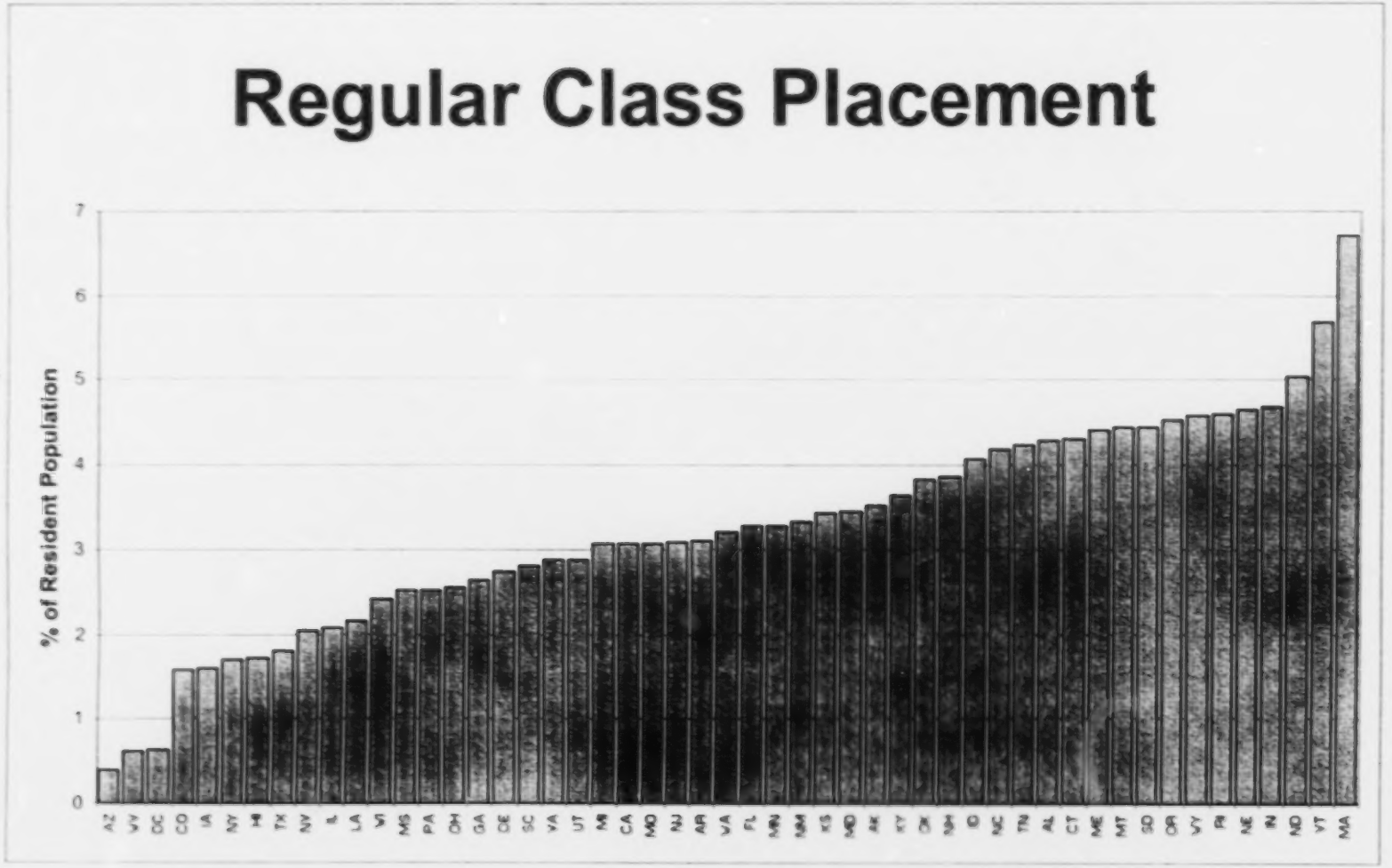

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Table 2
Comparison of Regular Classroom Placement Rates
By Type of Funding Formula

Type of Funding Formula / Basis of Allocation	Number Of States	Regular Class Placement Rate
Flat / District Enrollment	4	4.8
Weighted / Special Education Enrollment	1	4.5
% Reimbursement / Actual Expenditure	7	4.0
% Reimbursement / Allowable Cost	6	3.4
Weighted / Condition	7	3.0
Weighted / Placement and Condition	3	3.0
Resource-Based / Number of Special Education Staff	3	3.0
Resource-Based / Classroom Unit	7	3.0
Flat / Special Education Enrollment	3	2.7
Weighted / Placement	8	2.7
Resource-Based / Allowable Cost	1	2.1

Regular Class Placement Rates and Other State Characteristics

In order to explore whether regular class placement (like placement in separate class and separate schools, O'Reilly, 1995) is associated with region, states were ranked by regular class placement rates and divided into quartiles. The division was created such that Quartile 1 had the lowest rates and Quartile 4 had the highest rates.

Regional patterns are less evident in regular class placement except that the highest rates appear in the northern half of the country with a particular concentration in the north-central states. In contrast with O'Reilly's findings regarding separate class and separate school placements, the correlation of regular class placement with population density is non-significant (Pearson's $r = -.26$; $p = .07$). The data suggest that the determinants of regular class placement rates are multiple and complex. The influences of region and population density on regular class placement rates are less striking, compared to O'Reilly's findings with regard to more restrictive settings. States grouped according to funding formula and basis of allocation show quite a range of placement rates but an easily interpretable pattern is not readily detectable.

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Funding Formulas and Regular Class Placements: The Experiences of Three States

Three state directors of special education were interviewed regarding issues and perceptions regarding funding formulas and the placement of children with disabilities in integrated settings. States were chosen on the basis of a relatively high and increasing rate of placement of students with disabilities in regular classes. A description of characteristics of the three states is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
State Characteristics

Feature	State 1	State 2	State 3
Population Density	Low	Middle	Middle
Location	West	Mid-Atlantic	Midwest
Percent White - School Population	93	68	76
Number of School Districts	114	133	140
Percent of Adults Who Dropped Out	20	30	33

Two of the states reported that they employ a flat formula based on student enrollment. The formula in one, however, included adjustments for children served in public residential and day centers who have severe disabilities, and some monies for children over a 12.5% cap of student enrollment. In the other state that employed a flat formula, the formula included an incentive for identifying children with serious emotional disturbance (SED). The state funding formula in the third state was based on specific student-teacher ratios. The ratio decreased in more restrictive placements.

All of the states had experienced some changes in their funding formula in recent years. In the state with the flat formula and adjustment for serving students with SED, the previous formula had not been "placement neutral." When the formula was changed about five years ago, some local districts lost money. Nonetheless, most districts reported that they preferred the "placement neutral" formula.

All three states agreed that a "placement neutral" formula was preferred. The state without the "placement neutral" formula was seeking to change the formula, although consensus was lacking, and the timetable for when a change might occur was not clear.

Conclusions

This *Issue Brief* has presented information about state special education funding formulas and rates of placement in regular class settings. The available information does not support a particular funding formula or approach as a means to assure that both the FAPE and LRE mandates are fully implemented. In all likelihood, there are no incentive-free financing systems. "What is needed are state and federal fiscal policies that fully consider the desired balance between the sometimes competing needs of the LRE and the continuum of services requirements under IDEA" (Parrish, 1995b, p.6). The potential impact of a funding formula on both the FAPE and LRE mandate must be considered at the state and local level and in light of the many factors believed to influence services provided within inclusive arrangements that are appropriate and successful.

In all likelihood, there are no incentive-free financing systems.

A comprehensive picture of all of these factors must include, for example, updated information about the relative state and local share of special education costs. Without these data (previously a federal data reporting requirement), more subtle incentives or disincentives related to funding and placements in which students receive services cannot be known. There is evidence to suggest that the current federal data collection system related to the placement of student with disabilities is insensitive to some of the programmatic changes taking place across the country (Westat, 1994). The current data reporting requirements for settings in which services are received, for example, may not accurately or efficiently reflect current service delivery models (O'Reilly, 1995).

In conclusion, there is limited evidence that any particular funding formula is used more often by states with relatively higher rates of placements in regular classes. Many factors appear to affect placement patterns, only one of which is funding formulas. The grouping of states according to funding formula and basis of

allocation still leaves out the many other adjustments or aspects of implementation of the formula that states often incorporate and that may influence placement decisions within a state.

Consistent with the charge given to the IDEA Working Group to address separately problems with the law (IDEA) versus its implementation, we believe a reasonable policy course is 1) to focus on better implementation and balancing of both the FAPE and LRE mandates within states, and 2) to retain the current state flexibility in administration of funds for special education. Verstegen (1995) recently provided over 15 recommendations for the creation and successful management of more integrated funding and services. Among these were to: review "maintenance of effort" provisions, clarify the "supplement-not-supplant" fiscal accountability provisions, clarify the "incidental benefit" rule, provide federal aid at promised levels, redesign accountability models to focus on results in education and emerging practices for serving students with disabilities in general classrooms, and include students with disabilities as a part of discussions of national education goals.

State and local level educators and policymakers are in the best position to review these and other recommendations in light of particular circumstances, needs, and related initiatives at the federal and state level. As needed, additional reforms, changes in policies or monitoring procedures, continuing professional development initiatives, or changes in the funding formulas could be recommended to assure full identification, appropriate services, and least restrictive programming. For example, in the revision of special education service delivery models, policy makers and educators could also examine and redesign other categorical programs to create more collaborative and flexible systems. Recently, McLaughlin (1995) reported on many of the practices, issues and lessons learned by several states and locals in seeking to consolidate categorical educational programs.

The issue of where students with disabilities will be served remains a fundamental tenet of IDEA and an extremely challenging mandate to implement while providing all students with disabilities with FAPE. Continued examination of the many state and local factors that influence placement decisions within a context of responsible, informed reform is needed to balance and fully implement the requirements of IDEA.

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